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# **Brotherhood Considered – Responsibility and Tensions Concerning Elderly Support in North China**

By Xiu jie Wu

## **Summary**

The culture of the Han-Chinese designates brotherhood as a valuable form of alliance. Codes of behaviour towards one's brother(s) are ascribed in cultural norms. However, within the concept and practices of kinship, ambiguous borderlines of hierarchy and egalitarianism among brothers leave certain areas free for contesting individual interests. This article takes an extended case study of conflict between two brothers in their old age over their elderly support provisions to analyse how notions of brotherhood are re-shaped as Chinese peasants are confronted with serious social insecurity due to lower incomes and insufficient institutional arrangements for elderly support; how conventional concepts of hierarchy, equality, and fairness have been mobilised, interpreted in different ways to justify their own rights and rightness before the civil judgements of other villagers and the verdicts of the juridical system. This case study directs the reader's attention to the different facets of societal transformation in the last three decades, which impact kinship arrangements, and accordingly caused immense individual anxiety.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Die Kultur der Han-Chinesen sieht in der Bruderschaft eine wertvolle Form eines Bündnisses. Verhaltensregeln gegenüber dem eigenen Bruder sind in kulturellen Normen verankert. Jedoch bleiben im Verständnis und in der Praxis der Verwandtschaftsbeziehung unter Brüdern mit den vagen Grenzen zwischen Hierarchie und Gleichheit gewisse Freiräume für konkurrierende individuelle Interessen. Dieser Artikel betrachtet ausführlich die Fallstudie eines Konflikts zwischen zwei Brüdern in fortgeschrittenem Alter über Probleme der Altersversorgung. Er analysiert, wie der Begriff der Bruderschaft neuen Bewährungsproben ausgesetzt wird, auch angesichts der ersten sozialen Verunsicherung aufgrund geringer Einkommen und ungenügender institutioneller Altersvorsorge für chinesische Bauern. Er zeigt dabei, wie konventionelle Konzepte von Hierarchie, Gleichheit und Fairness benutzt und ausgenutzt werden, wie sie verschieden interpretiert werden, um das jeweils eigene Verständnis von Recht und Gerechtigkeit vor dem Urteil anderer Dorfbewohner und dem Schiedsspruch des juristischen Systems zu rechtfertigen. Diese Fallstudie lenkt die Aufmerk-

samkeit auf den Umstand, dass die gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen der letzten drei Jahrzehnte im gegenwärtigen ländlichen China die fundamentalen Wurzeln der Verwandtschaftsbeziehungen unterwandern und folglich immense individuelle Ängste begründen.

### **I. Paradoxes of Being Brothers (in Contemporary China)**

Numerous findings of anthropological classics repeatedly verify the importance of siblingship in establishing the social relations of a society. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the principle of the “equivalence of brothers” is especially important for a patrilineal society because the solidarity of brothers is indispensable for the maintenance of the patrilineal descent unit (Radcliffe-Brown 1971[1924]). Whether implementing structural-functional or cultural analysis, social anthropologists do not generally deny that brotherhood might be in some way “basic”, “important”, or “crucial” to an understanding of the culture in which they are embedded (Schneider 1983:394). However, since antiquity, hatred, hostility, apparent conflicts, and silent tensions between brothers are also not unfamiliar: “the closest genealogical relationship, that between brothers, is also the point of greatest tension” (Bourdieu 1977:39). Adult brothers keeping a distance between one another is described in ethnographies of different areas (e.g. Parish and Whyte 1978: 218 ff.; contributions in Marshall 1983; Peletz 1988; Schak 1989; Carsten 1989; Carsten 1995, etc).

Through what and in what way are brothers related? Mac Marshall identifies sharing as a common characteristic of kinship in all societies (Marshall 1977: 656). Brothers in north China share biogenetic substance – one of the most important symbolic resources of patrilineal social orders; they share family property and the duty of supporting parents in their old age from the moment of family division (Cohen 1992; Li, Feldman and Jin 2003); they share notions about commitment and solidarity for sustaining and renewing through recurrent acts of sharing and nurturance, namely to “create” intensive interpersonal relationships through interactions (*laiwang*) (Stafford 2000). But as the highly-proclaimed market economy in the last three decades has increasingly atomised individuals – as coping with actually serious social insecurity has become more and more challenging, as the shared family property among brothers is losing its practical value for subsistence and market value for commercial benefits, as the shared responsibility of supporting elderly parents is becoming a financial burden impairing the available resources for the offspring – does it still make sense to apply the conventional notions of being

brothers to regulate actual contested duties? How do the actors concerned cope with these tensions under new economic, social, and juridical circumstances? This article offers a snapshot of the overlapped area of two relevant issues: the relationship among brothers and the elderly support arrangements.

## II. Field Site and Methodological Considerations

The empirical materials used in this article stem from my one-year fieldwork during 2006 and 2007, the focus of which was on the issue of “kinship and social support”, in the village of Cheer, in the Hebei Province of north China. Situated about 200 kilometres south from Beijing, it has not been affected directly through either urbanisation or rural industries. The village is a settlement with nearly 5000 inhabitants in about 1100 households (during the period of my field stay), surrounded by arable land on which wheat, chilly pepper, peanut, cotton, vegetables, tree plants, etc. are cultivated. Although since 2006 the peasants are exempt from any taxes and fees concerning agriculture, land-cultivating is becoming less and less lucrative and attractive. Young and middle-aged members of the family tend to chose jobs outside, whether on construction sites in urban areas or in factories, to improve the total family income. One-tenth of all households make their living through supplying commodities and offering services for the daily needs of the villagers.

The case study centres on four males of two generations, of each generation two brothers are involved. The results of a conflict divided the original one household into three independent ones. The two men of the elder generation were born in the 1930s and 1940s and the two men of the younger generation in the 1960s, before the introduction of the one-child policy. The social conditions of these two generations have some common characteristics: First, to have one or more brother(s) is normal. Second, the task of supporting parents in their old age is exclusively attributed to the male offspring. The care policy of childless elderly, established in the era of collectivisation, finds its continuity in the era of reform. Theoretically, even childless elderly people shall be guaranteed acceptable conditions of subsistence, but the actual provisions offered to them are not sufficient so that it is still only the last solution for most childless elderly to spend their last years (days) in an elderly home (*jinglao yuan*)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning the hardship of this marginal social group see Zhang (2007). Five kinds of basic provision (clothes, nourishment, shelter, medical treatment and burial) for a childless elderly person will be taken over by the state.

My reconstruction of this case is based mainly on the narratives of the involved people after the conflict had been settled. Since strong elements of “*Rechtfertigungsgeschichten*” (Lehmann 1980) are unavoidable in such memorials, I focus on the interpretative logics of different actors instead of the “objective truth”. The aim of this extended case study is not to offer a representative pattern of dealing with conflicts among brothers, but to uncover individuals’ dynamic mobilisation of non-synchronic value elements in synchronic tense (*Ungleichzeitigkeiten in Gleichzeitigkeit*) (Bausinger 1987). This methodological attempt is inspired by some fruitful case studies undertaken by historians (such as Sabeen 1997 [1984], Tanner 2008), which take individuals having options as a starting point and observe their practices in a larger social and institutional context.

III. A Crucial Case

To simplify the narrative technique, I have assigned every main character an ID code composed of letters and numbers. The initial letter is the case indicator, in this case it is A. The number immediately following indicates the vertical generation sequence: the first generation being 1, the second being 2. The second number indicates the horizontal sequence according to age: the elder brother being 1, the younger brother being 2. The final letter indicates the sex of the character: M for male, W for wife. The kindred of all three generations depicted in figure 1 are full siblings.

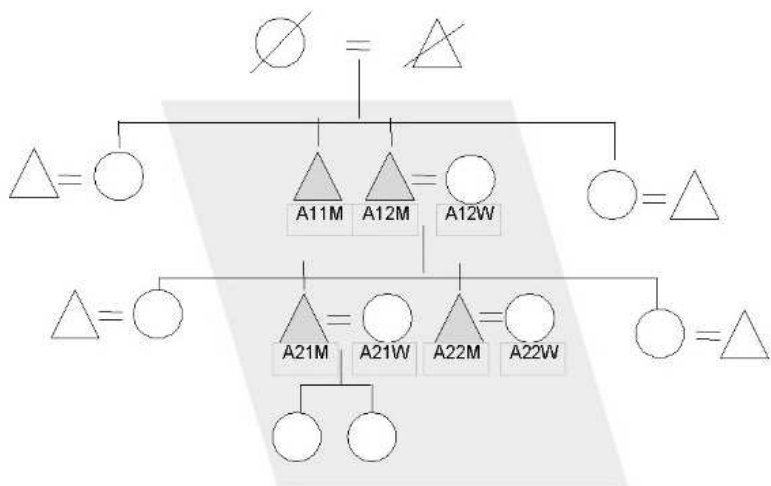


Figure 1: Family A – Before the First Family Division

I came across the brothers A11M and A12M when I was conducting semi-structured household interviews at the very beginning of my fieldwork with no knowledge of their quarrels. Although they did not have any interaction at that time, both of them did not hesitate to acknowledge being brothers and to let me enter the data in my questionnaire. On our way home, my assistant told me that I should not ask them questions about interactions among kin because these two brothers were in such a state of hostility that they were as alienated as foes. "Even the court was involved", added my assistant.

To my surprise, this "family ugliness" (*jia chou*) did not seem to have destroyed the reputations of the two brothers. Both households were integrated normally into village social life. Regarding the brothers' dispute, each had his supporters.

#### IV. Family and Individual Backgrounds

Until 1995, family A was praised by the villagers due to their long-term harmony as an extended family. As figure 1 shows, the unmarried elder brother, A11M, the younger brother, A12M, and his wife, A12W, established the first generation of this family. The second generation also comprises two male offspring. The elder one, A21M, married a girl from the same village. The couple had two girls within two years. In 1994, the family planned to build new houses because the second son, A22M, had been engaged to a girl from the neighbouring village for a few months. They were to get married in a new house. The village committee assigned building land totalling 12 *jian*<sup>2</sup>, of which one plot consisted of eight *jian* and the second of four, the latter being located in the row just behind the first. All the plans, including the house building and the marriage, were carried out smoothly. Four months after A22M's marriage, the first family division was completed without the participation of A11M. In north China, family division after the marriage of the youngest son is normal. On these occasions, the family property should be divided among the nuclear families of the younger generation, and the duties of supporting the elderly should be negotiated and made clear in the family division documents (see also Cohen

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<sup>2</sup> The *Jian* is the popular unit by which, conventionally, the spatial dimensions of a house are indicated. In Cheer, the area of a one *jian* building plot is 66 square metres. A standard building plot contains 4 *jian*. The village policy of assigning building plots is oriented to the patrilocal regulations. It is intended that one son should take over the site of his parents' house to build a new one; the other son(s) of a family being able to get a building plot assigned freely when approaching the age of marriage.

2005:118–132). However, for family A, this was the beginning of a series of conflicts that began with the two brothers of the older generation, then also affected the younger, and turned one family into three separated households.

A11M was born in 1930. He is of short stature, about 1.65m, and is at least one head shorter than his brother, A12M, who was born twelve years later in 1942. A11M was also born with a minor physical defect: his left shoulder tucks into his neck so that he has a small hump on his left shoulder blade. But it has never impeded his working ability. On the contrary, he is well-known in the village as a man capable of nearly all kinds of work. During the collective period, he guided the agricultural activities of his production team with success. He also mastered activities in the kitchen which were conventionally attributed to women, his working skills being even better than most women's. Additionally, he could cut clothes and use a sewing machine. He was also able to coordinate a big kitchen catering for a large group. Whenever possible, villagers asked for his help in planning celebrations. He is a well-respected man in the village and has good personal relationships.

He has three siblings, one elder sister, one younger brother, and one younger sister, but he never married. When he was 19, his father died. In fact, at that time, A11M was the only labourer in the family. In his words, women of good situation would not marry into a family with so heavy a burden. Consequently, he had no opportunities for marriage. Later, when his younger brother A12M married, their mother was still alive, so they all lived together. The brothers also continued to share one household after their mother passed away. The family income was under A11M's control, and consumption was dependent on his decisions. At the beginning of the 1980s, he might have had the opportunity to get married to an immigrant woman from one of the impoverished areas. However, because it was very unlikely for him to produce his own offspring due to his advanced age, he finally abandoned the idea of taking a wife.

His younger brother A12M has had a relatively normal life. He is a good peasant and can bear hard work. At the age of 65, he was working on construction sites as if he were still a young man. His wife, A12W, is a well-respected woman with a good temper. She speaks softly and is always friendly to relatives and neighbours. She has never played a major role in the family. Against the generally prevailing prejudices that women are always responsible for any disharmony in the relationships of adult brothers, nobody in the village thinks that she has contributed to the family conflicts.

The two brothers in the second generation have very different tempers. The elder brother, A21M, is a healthy, pleasant, talkative, handsome young man. His wife comes from a family with numerous relatives in the same village. She is also a talkative person, healthy, strong, and hard-working, and is fond of spending her spare time with others. The younger brother A22M is, on the contrary, a silent person. He has always been very thin and weak. His wife's family lives in a neighbouring village. They both have similar characters and, in the words of his wife, A22W, they are honest people. Even though they are not very active in communicating with others, they have nevertheless, and according to my observations, good contacts with both neighbours and relatives.

### V. Family Division and its Revision

The first family division was requested by A12M while his elder brother A11M was away from home (he was jobbing at that time as a cook at a construction site). As is customary, four elderly members of the same lineage (*dang jia zi*) were invited as mediators and witnesses. The property and the duty of supporting the elderly were shared equally by the two brothers A21M and A22M. According to the information given by A12M and his wife, the stipulated duty of their two sons was to support all three elderly family members until they died. (Pitifully, the two copies of this agreement were burnt at the time of the second division, so that the conditions of the first agreement thereby lost their validity.)

When A11M came back to the village two months later, he was upset due to the fact that the family division had been accomplished without asking his opinion. Now the younger couples formed their own separate households with only the three elderly members taking their meals together. Tensions between the two brothers of the elder generation increased and were expressed at first by rude behaviour such as banging bowls or slamming doors. Then the conflict escalated from verbal to physical violence. A11M was accused of hitting his sister-in-law, but without there being any witnesses to this incident. As a result of this accusation, A12M quarrelled with his elder brother and slapped him once in the face, this time in the presence of a witness. This was the climax of the silent tensions. A11M then made up his mind to overturn the results of the first family division.

A11M convinced the future Party Secretary of the village (at that time, he was unofficially designated to obtain the foremost position in the village) to give his sympathy and support due to the following points:



1. The correct process of family division should be at first the division between the two brothers of the elder generation, then the division between the two brothers of the younger generation. Even though I have no offspring, I represent one branch of the family/lineage. What they have done up to now is to erase my branch;
2. Of the two sons, one has to be attributed to my name and to support and care for me until my last day. Although I am not the biological father, I shared all the responsibility of parenthood from the day of their birth.

The Party Secretary promised to call a new family division committee to make reasonable revisions.

The new committee also had four members, two from the former committee, the Party Secretary himself, and a new eligible member. The juridical assistant of the township, of which the village was a part, was also invited to attend the second family division meeting as a semi-official witness. This time all the wishes of A11M were fulfilled. He chose to adopt the second son A22M, who was also willing to have him do so. According to the new agreement, the houses of the 12 *jian* plot of land were to be shared equally between A11M and A12M. As the adopted son of A11M, A22M now had the duty of supporting his adoptive father A11M, and he was fully released from any duty to support his biological parents. A21M alone would have the duty of supporting them.

This time it was A12M who felt insulted. Throughout the whole meeting, he lay on the *Kang* (brick-bed) without saying anything. In the end, he was forced (according to his argument) to put his fingerprints on the two copies of the agreement. He decided not to talk to his elder brother anymore and to terminate any relationship with him. For A12M, such cruel robbery of half of his property and one of his two sons showed that his elder brother no longer cared for the affection of “hands and feet” (*shou zu*) and simply ignored the fact that they shared “the same mother breasts and the same womb” (*yi nai tong bao*) (Both expressions are prevailing jargon describing brotherhood). Even before that evening, he had apparently already had conflicts with his second son and the latter’s wife, because both son and daughter-in-law were obviously on the side of the uncle and not of the father.

## VI. In Search of Fairness with Juridical Weapons

For most families in the village of Cheer, the most valuable and, accordingly, most appreciated private property is the house, or to be exact, the building plot. When the houses on the 12 *jian* plot were

divided equally between the two brothers of the elder generation, the conflicts were then transmitted to the next generation. Since each of the brothers had only one male offspring in the legal sense, their property would be transferred in total to the son or adoptive son. But A21M and his wife A21W felt themselves to be disadvantaged: *With the same share of property, why do we have to support two elderly people, while they (A22M and his wife) only support one (and a much older) elderly person?* The two couples of the younger generation now became arch-enemies, cursed each other with the most poisonous words, and broke off any interaction as kin and as neighbours.

The former family was now divided into three separate households as figure 2 shows:

1. A11M and his adopted son and daughter-in-law. They had a really happy family life: one granddaughter and one grandson were born after the family division;
2. A12M and his wife, who made their own living. They promised their first son that they would 'keep the bowl of water on the horizontal level' (keep things in balance) so that fairness between the two brothers of the younger generation would be ensured: if the second son did not fulfil his duty of supporting his biological parents, the parents would make no claim on the first son. They tried to arrange an independent living for as long as possible;
3. A21M, his wife, and their two daughters.

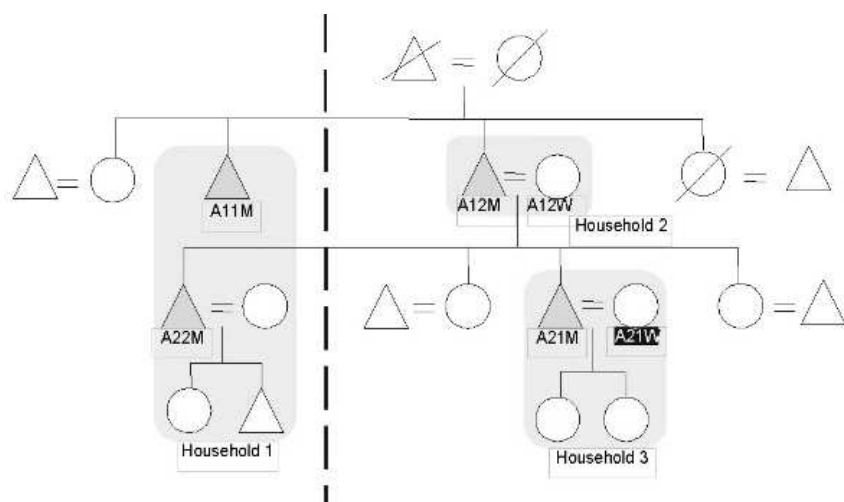


Figure 2: Family A – After the Second Family Division

The parent-son relationship between A21M and his biological parents was formally broken off. It is said that for a certain period A21M secretly gave his mother some money whenever he came back from an outside job. During the whole process of the family division, he had no direct conflict with his mother. But the whole issue changed dramatically in 2001 when his father A12M sued him for parental support in the township court. Incapable of bearing the unfairness imposed on him by the second family division agreement, A12M tried, by means of the state juridical institution, to gain the rights that, in his opinion, he deserved. For him, the obvious facts justified his demands beyond any doubt: *I actually have a second son. I raised him, built a house for him, and found a wife for him. I fulfilled all my duties as a father. And why does he suddenly have nothing to do with me?* The juridical mediators of the township judged the family division agreements to be valid and rejected his claim. A12M then took the matter up with the court of second instance in the county city.

This court accepted the filed suit. The investigation into and the hearing of the case lasted more than a year. Officials in uniform, in a white mini-bus bearing in blue the two Chinese characters *fa yuan* (court), went to the village a few times. They questioned the people in charge, visited the two households and collected witnesses' statements. In January 2003, the court affirmed the juridical validity of the family division agreement in a binding verdict. A12M had to confront defeat once again. But the involvement of the court turned the family quarrel into a public event. Since then, practically nobody has anticipated reconciliation, at least not in the near future.

Before giving further analysis to the different arguments in the above-mentioned case, it is necessary to clarify some cultural notions of brotherhood in China.

## VII. Cultural Notions of Brotherhood in China

Sibling relationships are the longest-lasting human social relationships and exceed, on average, the length of relationships with parents, children, and friends. They are essential and challenging but at the same time also vulnerable because, in the view of social psychologists (Michalskie and Euler 2008:185), they are accompanied by associated opportunities and costs. In the patrilineal society of China, the term "brother" has been implemented beyond the circle of blood-related males of the same generation to refer to those of close relatedness, such as "sworn-brothers" (Jordan 1985) or "same-year siblings" (Santos 2008). In one of the earliest Confucian classics of rituals, *Liji*, brother-

hood is regarded as one of the five fundamental relationships; its importance is valued more than that of friends, although less than that of ruler-subordinate, father-son, or husband-wife. Among the numerous ethical values of Confucianism, *xin* (trustfulness) for personal integrity and interpersonal relations, *zhong* (loyalty) for social coherence, and *xiao* (filial piety) are well-known as the foundations of the family and the state (Yao 2003:5). As the term *xiao* refers to the dutiful submission of children to their parents in the forms of feeding the parents, showing them respect, keeping in mind their needs and concerns, giving them a proper funeral and offering sacrifices after their death (Ebrey 2003), its analogical term “*ti*” (fraternal, brotherly) designates the obedience, respect, and deference that a younger brother owes his elder brother (Knapp 2003:604).

But like any other interpersonal relationships in practice, brotherhood is also a mutually created bond, although it is already partly predicted through shared biogenetic substance. In the book *Family Instructions for the Yen Clan*, the learned Yan Zhitui (Yen Chih-T'ui) (531–591?) described his understanding of heading family life as instructions for his offspring. In this work, an entire chapter is dedicated to “brotherhood” because, according to his opinion, brotherhood is the third most important following those of husband-wife and father-son. Brothers are parts of the same physical inheritance and have the same spirit. Even though they have their own life, friends, and offspring, the connection between brothers is founded on the most essential basis of life, vital energy (*qi*); they share the same essence albeit in separate physical bodies (*xiongdi nai fenxing tongqi zhi ren*). But the vulnerability of brotherhood is too obvious to be neglected, and therefore he appealed for brotherhood to be maintained carefully in order to protect it even from minor harm, just as every crack and mouse hole should be repaired in time so that the whole house will not easily be destroyed. In comparison with the moral idioms of father-son relationships, the added stress of reciprocal responsibility among brothers is regarded as the necessary condition for a viable brotherhood. In the words of Yan Zhitui, “If one does not treat his elder brother in the same way as he treats his father, why should one complain if the elder brother does not reply with as much affection as the father does?” (translated by the author of this article)<sup>3</sup>. Again, the hierarchical structure of elder and younger brother is justified through a semi-analogy of that of father

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<sup>3</sup> An elegant translation is: „An elder brother should be treated in the same way as a father. Why then, should love of a younger brother be less than love of a son?“ (See Yen 1968:10). But I understand that, in this passage, the author stressed the subjectivity of the persons concerned, especially that of the younger brother.

and son. But notions of brotherhood and, accordingly, how to maintain harmonic family life found different echoes even among Confucian scholars in the Song Dynasty. While some stressed the strictly hierarchical structure of birth order, others valued the equal treatment of brothers as an effective solution for family tensions (Ebrey 1984:224–229).

### VIII. Breaking Hierarchy into Equality

The bond between brothers was the implicit model for all other types of male homosocial relations (Jordan 1985; Kutcher 2000; Santos 2008). Folk sayings celebrate fraternal solidarity as the most reliable relationship, on par with that of father and son, in the crucial moment of survival or death.<sup>4</sup> But this highly-praised relationship entails an intrinsic contradiction consisting of a hierarchical order of status but, at the same time, equal claims to family property, referred to by Arthur Wolf as “a structural weakness at the very center of the Chinese kinship system” (Wolf 1970:206) and verified by other studies of Taiwan (Cohen 1976; Freedman 1970). The question to be raised is: how should we identify brother-relationships in the schema of societal construction?

In 1947, Xiaotong Fei [Hsiao-Tung Fei] introduced the key phrase “*cha xu geju*” to describe the pattern of personal relationships in Chinese social life (Fei 1992 [1947]:60–70), which are ego-centred, via personal power and authority-dominated. Fei depicts the concept “*cha xu geju*” by means of a literary metaphor:

“... it is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the centre of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone’s circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and places.” (Fei 1992 [1947]:62–63)

But beyond the vivid scene invoked by the metaphor, what does it mean exactly? In this concept, two terms are introduced: the first one is *cha*, which literally means *social/spatial distance* or *differential*; the second is *xu*, which literally means *hierarchy* or *order of sequence*. The word *geju* can be understood as *model* or *construction*. In the process of translation, part of the implications of this concept is often neglected or reduced; for example, in stressing the word “*cha*”, it is translated as a “differential mode of association” (Fei 1992 [1947]:60) or, in stressing the word “*xu*”, as “hierarchical structure” (Santos 2006:321). Fei con-

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<sup>4</sup> *Dazhang qin xiongdi, shangzhen fuzi bin* (On the battle field, one needs the consanguine brothers, father and sons as reliable campaign partners.)

cluded the essay with an explanation of the functional mechanism of social morality in the network composed of each individual's personal connections: it "makes sense only in term of these personal connections" (Fei 1992 [1947]:70). Accordingly, the concept of *cha xu geju* has been used nearly exclusively to successfully enrich studies of *guanxi* or social networks (Harrel 2001).

The re-reading of Fei's book *From the Soil* (Fei 1992 [1947]) leads me to position brotherhood on the coordinate axis of *cha* and *xu*, in order to make its constellation easily perceivable. As in any other type of relationship, its parameters are the horizontal distance (differentiation), associated with equality of status, and the vertical distance associated with hierarchy. The vertical distance between two certain persons, say X and Y, indicates the strength of control while the horizontal distance signifies the degree of the interaction. In the Chinese patriarchal and patrilocal kinship concept, brothers are positioned with the shortest horizontal and vertical distances, so that the relationships among brothers are easily disturbed, and the line of hierarchy is apt to be blurred and fluid. Hierarchy and equality are the essential elements of constructing brotherhood. We might call this pair of concepts "fraternal double". The form of "double" has its cosmological and philosophical roots in the Chinese culture, as Francesca Bray refers, the full character or meaning of a double emerges "through the echoings, complementarities and contrasts between the pair" (Bray 1997:349). The hierarchical structure of brothers is the weakest even though, since the Song Dynasty, some scholars of Neo-Confucianism have appealed to have it considerably strengthened. But as historians of China show, even in the elite circle where obeying Confucian regulations strictly was a requirement, ideals were seldom completely fulfilled in practice (Ebrey 1981; Mann 1987). By means of the documented fratricide cases of late Imperial China, Adrian Davis shows that the understanding of the concept of fraternity among common people was very diverse, the grounds for escalation varying from conflicts over economic interests to abuses of seniority (Davis 2000). Also in the contemporary case discussed in this article, the fluidity between hierarchy and equality is obvious.

If we consider the biographical data of the two brothers A11M and A12M and set their relative positions in the coordinated axis of *cha* and *xu*, we find that their horizontal distance is very short while the vertical distance (hierarchy) is longer than usual for brothers. The hierarchical order of the two brothers is obvious. In fact, the superiority of A11M had been acknowledged for a long time. Until the first family division, he had been the family head and was involved in all the serious family issues such as house building. It is noteworthy that his

hierarchical advantage was not only due to the order of birth. In fact, after the death of their father, A11M took over this role<sup>5</sup> and raised his younger siblings; he contributed to the family income by sharing the duty of nurturing a big family of four children during the hard time of collectivisation; his socialising capability brought “social capital” to the family. Using the analytical framework of the circles *yang* (nurture) and *laiwang* (interactions) put forward by Charles Stafford (2000), A11M’s role towards his younger brother and the rest of his family is situated in the overlapping area of the two circles. A further fact to be noted is that the *laiwang* was an asymmetric flow with economic benefits for the younger brother.

The structural fluidity of hierarchy turned into a concrete shift of superiority and inferiority between these two brothers as they were getting older. Contrary to his younger brother, who had two married sons, A11M became marginalised in social status due to being childless. In the firm opinion of A12M and other male kin, A11M was no longer worthy to be consulted about family issues. Superiority was obviously in the hands of A12M and he had become the core figure eligible for arranging family matters, while A11M had become a subject who should be attended to fairly due to his past contributions. After the conflict became apparent, some villagers reproached A12M for the non-diplomatic way in which he aimed to ensure sharing the entire family property between his two sons through a formal family division agreement. But A12M was convinced that he need not have a bad conscience regarding his elder brother. He acknowledged the latter’s superiority in the past and believed he had offered fair rewards to him because, in the first family division agreement, A11M was entitled to receive the same support and care as A12M and his wife until his death. This meant that the social status of A11M was promoted to the degree of one who had two sons of his own, the heartfelt dream of every childless elderly person.

For A11M, the inverted hierarchical structure within the extended family aroused in him deep feelings of uncertainty. In his view, the first family division agreements were not only deficient in their formalities (by taking place in his absence), but the essential point was the fact that his existence was being neglected: although he would not starve, his dignity was not worth considering. He had no means to protect himself against this misery. He hesitated a few months before taking any action to make revisions. He was aware of the risk of taking the step he later did. It might have led to him being cast out in his four *jian*

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<sup>5</sup> A folk-saying depicts such a situation with the metaphor „the elder brother is like the father“ (*zhang xiong rufu*).

house, without any claims to be supported by relatives, as with the other childless elderly people. As the private tensions among the three elderly persons within the household increased, he felt his worries so confirmed that he made the decision to take the risk for a better future. As an operational strategy, he gave up customary notions of reciprocity concerning his former superiority (this is exactly the argumentative strategy of his younger brother) and, as a useful weapon, turned to arguments of fairness on the basis of fraternal equality and looked for its validity in the laws of custom and in the official legal system. It should not be overlooked that fraternal equality in the sense of customary laws is not restricted only to claims of family property, but also to transmitted bloodlines. During the whole process of conflict, he insisted on the notion of egalitarianism acknowledged in Chinese kinship ideology: a childless male also represents a branch of the lineage. The well-accepted solution is to adopt a son of a close relative, most commonly a brother's son. This custom law justified A11M's demands to overthrow the agreements of the first family division. A11M intentionally neglected his high moral status in the last fifty years so that he left no space for his younger brother to argue in terms of reciprocity. I once talked to A11M: "In fact, you raised him". "No", he answered without any hesitation, "it was our mother who raised him. When he got married, our mother was still alive. I only helped my mother support the family."

A11M's claim of equality with the result of adopting A22M was approved by customary law and the official legal system; although the reasons behind the approval are totally different. The legal system does not acknowledge the claim of the continuing bloodline, but treats A22M as an adult citizen whose wish to become an adoptive son of A11M has to be considered. This actual result is difficult for A12M to accept. In his opinion, the precondition for anyone to adopt his son must be his agreement. But in fact his elder brother and his second son reached an agreement without consulting A12M and his wife. By indicting his second son for parents' support provision before the court, he tried to ensure fairness for the other family members with the help of the official legal system, a demand which is also compatible with the laws of custom, and which many villagers sympathised with.

### **IX. Fairness and Insecurity**

We might argue that brothers in contemporary rural China are related through a kind of "fraternal double", i.e. fluid mutability of hierarchy and equality, on the basis of sharing family property as well as responsibility of supporting parents in their old age. As the case study



in this article shows, notions of hierarchy and equality could be strategically accentuated as tools to approach one's aim and to justify one's deeds. Though issues referred to vary, the term "fairness" remains untouched in articulating conflicts: everyone is pursuing the fairness she/he deserves. Not only in the intra-generational but also in the inter-generational conflicts concerning elderly support, the logic of fairness serves as a strong argumentative weapon, used both by the parents and their accused sons and daughter-in-laws (Guo 2001).

It would thus be inadequate to conclude that the rural residents of China have a distinctive consciousness of pursuing fairness. Actually, Chinese peasants have been accustomed to accepting diverse kinds of unfairness overshadowing their life courses, whether caused by unpredictable fate or by visible power-holders. The discourse of fairness remains often on the abstract level. The superlative form of praying for fairness is reflected in the popular rhetoric formulation "*laotian you yan*" ("my good Heaven, open your eyes!") which indicates extreme desperation and bewilderment. The conflict mediator in the village of Cheer, a semi-voluntary position for conciliating conflicts in the name of the village committee, verified that in mediating conflicts concerning elderly support, his main aim was to find solutions which could grant plausible fairness.

The strong trend of arguing elderly support issues pursuing fairness indicates that rural elderly are suffering immensely from insecurity and uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> In an article published in 1994, Franz and Keebet Benda-Beckmann indicate the necessity to take an "underall" perspective to consider the issues of social security in the Third World (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann 2000[1994]). Such a perspective is still stimulating in observing (not only rural) China, because coping with insecurity and uncertainty is still mainly left to the private realm, since the state-run institutional arrangements are too insufficient.

Elderly in the village of Cheer feel themselves depending on their child(ren), while young people are trying hard to escape from rural areas to a more promising future in urban settings. One source of insecurity for the elderly generation is that they are losing the ability of earning their living through cultivating the land. On the one hand, mechanisation of agricultural work like the wheat harvest is becoming well-accepted, greatly facilitating the work for the human labourers. On the other hand, incomes from agricultural products are becoming

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<sup>6</sup> For the whole society it is urgent to find new patterns of elderly support to confront the 4-2-1 family structure (four elderly, one couple and one child), namely the demographic results of the more than three decades old one-child policy. The rural elderly suffer more severely than other social groups.

less relevant. For example, for the villagers in Cheer, chilly-pepper is the cash-crop. In comparison to 2006, the selling price of chilly-pepper in 2010 remained the same while the daily wages for employed labourers increased threefold. The generation of the elderly in their seventies are used to the self-sufficient ways of existence, but now they have to purchase many daily items for subsistence with cash. The only solution is to take money from their responsible supporters. The elderly support provisions regulated years before have to be updated, an action which not always leads to a happy end. At the same time, the elderly have also lost the possibility to do domestic work like child-caring, cooking, raising domestic animals, etc. for the younger generation. For the elderly, cultural values of work are disappearing, so that they are becoming “useless” persons. Some rural elderly actively re-structure their social and civic ties for arranging independent daily life as long as they can still afford, in articulating the role of individual choice and personal freedom (Zhang 2004; Thøgersen and Ni 2008), while others claim support provisions on the basis of pursuing fairness. In fact, they are the two sides of the same coin. Behind such decisions are the visibly increasing insecurity and uncertainty, which overshadow their life in old age.

## **X. Concluding Remarks**

The ambiguity of brotherhood makes it potentially possible, to turn one's brother into an alliance partner or a foe. It lies in the intrinsic essence of the social structure of human society, as the ethnography worldwide well documents. The case study in this article shows that expressive forms of the ambiguity are directly related to the large context of the economic and social circumstances. Social policy plays a crucial role in regulating responsibility and tensions among brothers, even though rural residents in China are not yet accustomed to connecting their individual fates with state policy directly.

In the case of family A in Cheer, the two brothers of the elder generation embedded pursuing their aims in the available social orders – conventional kinship ideology of bloodlines, notions like fairness, revenge, or reciprocal responsibilities, AND the state laws to justify their own rights and rightness before the judgements of other villagers and the verdicts of the juridical system. They mobilised all possible sources to struggle for a tiny portion of the security ensured by institutional arrangement. Whether they reached this most modest aim is questionable. For A12M, it was obviously not so. When I visited him and his wife in July 2008, they were just facing a new challenge. His wife had survived a cerebral haemorrhage and needed intensive medical treat-

ment and daily care, both of which demanded the engagement of responsible son(s) and daughter(s)-in-law, but the attribution of responsibility was, as of then, not clear. Even A11M, who seemingly obtained everything he wanted, was also occupied with uncertainties. He had secretly made copies of all written documents concerning the family divisions, wrapped these papers in a piece of plastic in the form of a tube, and concealed them in a hidden place behind a push-loading drawer. He told me:

In the current situation, I am not worried about not being supported by [A22M] and his wife. Both of them and the two grandchildren are filial to me. [A22W] has a good heart. [A22M] is a good boy. I saw him grow up and he was always very fond of me. This is why I chose [A22M]. But who knows what can happen in the future. There is still the real parent-child relationship (*qin de*). If they do not support me anymore, I have to show some evidence of the agreements . . .

In the village of Cheer, since the last quarter of 2006, childless elderly over 60 have enjoyed the state support provision of 100 *yuan* monthly, a sum which clearly exceeded the customary consumption level of most rural elderly. Some of these childless elderly even distribute the money to their brothers or nephews. A11M was exempt from this social benefit, because he was not childless anymore in the legal sense. Some villagers criticised A11M with the argument: *if they lived just like in the past, he would also get 100 yuan monthly, enough as pocket money for all three of them. How good!* It might be true if this social welfare policy had been implemented ten or fifteen years earlier; the brothers A11M and A12M might have resolved their interests and emotions differently. Thinking about this issue would be an additional psychological burden for them, just like pouring salt into an open wound.

The American journalist Peter Hessler identifies China's biggest worry in the deeply internalised anxiety of individuals (Hessler 2010). Such anxiety caused by insecurity and uncertainty still tends to increase in all age groups. Especially for those rural residents, though dependence on kinship for organising social support provisions is becoming increasingly unreliable, better alternatives are still less realistic. A sensible state policy for social security would be helpful to reduce the pressure for the individuals, if it is conceptualised on the legacies of the kinship-based society, as a complementary instead of competitive impulse to the already overburdened kinship responsibilities. After all, kinship does not mean much more than "a manifold of intersubjective participations, founded on mutualities of being" (Sahlins 2011:10).

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